

# Ask a Child Care Adviser: Preparing for the start of a new year

*Georgia McKay spoke with Child Care Advisers Megan Shaw and Eulalia Verde about the challenges of starting a new year in child care and strategies for managing these.*

While it can be a time of significant change, the start of the year is an exciting and busy time in many child care services. At this time services often have new children enrolling, and many also have new child care professionals commencing employment. As children transition to school, services also frequently experience movement of children throughout the service as they move into new age groupings. There may also be associated staffing changes at this time, with staff moving to new areas or rooms in the service.

## What are the key challenges that may arise at the beginning of a new year in a child care service?

Most services have an influx of new enrolments at the beginning of the year, often including some children who have never attended care before. This can be a demanding time for children, their families and child care professionals, particularly when children take time to settle and experience difficulties separating from their family.

It is important that child care professionals begin building positive relationships with children and families and facilitate children's and families' relationships with each other from the time that children start care. However, creating good relationships relies on effective two way communication which can be difficult to achieve at a time when child care professionals are busy assisting a large number of children and families to settle into child care.

Families and children can also encounter particular challenges when they start at a type of child care with which they are unfamiliar. For example, when enrolling in a long day care service after using family day care, a child and their family may find it hard to adjust to a larger setting with more children and multiple staff.

Establishing routines is an important task as this assists children to settle and to begin to gain an understanding of the expectations and boundaries of the service. However, setting routines and establishing clear limits for children's

### This article relates to:

[FDCQA Principles: 1.1-1.4](#)

[OSHCQA Principles: 1.2, 2.2, and 3.1](#)

[QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 1.4 and 2.1-2.3](#)

behaviour can be quite complicated when child care professionals are still getting to know children. Children who are new to the service may also find it hard to adjust to behaviour expectations that are different to what they have experienced at home or in other child care settings.

Children who move to a new area or room in the service may experience similar issues with settling as newly enrolled children. They and their families can find it hard to adapt to a new environment with unfamiliar routines and they may both struggle with moving on from the familiar child care professionals with whom they have developed strong relationships. Some families may even feel resentment about their child having to move.

Children who will be starting primary school may return to child care for the time prior to school term one commencing. While this can be beneficial for children and their families, it can also be challenging for child care professionals. Family day care professionals who have their own school age children can also experience the additional pressure of having to accommodate the needs of their own children as well as those of children in their service during the school holidays.

## What strategies can reduce the challenges of starting a new year?

### Develop a good orientation process

Having a comprehensive orientation procedure is vital for reducing the difficulties that may be experienced at the beginning of the year. Offering a flexible, individualised approach to orientation will ensure that it can meet individual children's and families' needs. For example, some families may like to accompany their child for a

series of orientation visits before the child starts, while others may prefer to have their child initially attend shorter days. Offering the option of an orientation event for new and current families and child care professionals can also be a good opportunity to build relationships and share information. Children who will be moving to a new room will also benefit greatly from having a positive orientation experience for this transition.

The service's orientation process should also include procedures for communicating key information and policies to families. Effective communication strategies might include developing a family handbook, using signs and posters and holding orientation meetings for either individual or groups of families.

In family day care it is also important to establish some 'house rules' from the outset. For example, letting families know whether it is appropriate to knock on the front door before entering and identifying the areas of the carer's home that are private.

### **Maintain the focus on quality for children**

Child care professionals often feel conflicted at the beginning of the year as they struggle to prioritise the many important tasks associated with settling new and returning children and families, setting up the environment, establishing routines and orienting new colleagues. To minimise the issues associated with this, it is important that child care professionals focus first and foremost on what will lead to the best quality outcomes for children. For example, while decorating the locker area may make it more inviting, it will be more beneficial for children to focus on ensuring that the program is genuinely responsive to children's interests.

### **Use the momentum of the new year**

While the changes that often occur at the start of the year can be challenging or stressful for some individuals, many child care professionals, children and families return to the service after an end of year break feeling refreshed and ready for new experiences. Having meetings and/or social occasions for child care professionals and families that incorporate some planning activities can be a useful way to galvanise positive change for the service at the start of the year. Families and child care professionals who are new to the service may also be able to offer fresh, innovative ideas, and it may be easy to implement change at a time when routines and practices are just being established.



It can also be an appropriate time to reflect on what worked well during the previous year, and to identify opportunities for improvement. Feedback on the successes of the previous year should be sought from all stakeholders, including children, families and child care professionals.

### **Plan ahead**

Planning ahead is an important strategy for minimising problems that may be experienced at the start of the year. To identify the issues that may arise at this time services will find it invaluable to consult child care professionals, families and children to determine what may be difficult for them at the start of the year. Depending upon their specific needs and circumstances, services may be able to plan and implement strategies such as:

- having one or more 'child free' days at the start of the year for child care professionals to set up the environment
- staggering enrolments so that all new children do not start at the same time
- staggering start days for different age groups or rooms
- employing an additional 'floating' staff member for a short period of time
- planning excursions or special activities for children who are at the service either because they are on school holidays or waiting to start school in term one. Family day care scheme coordination unit staff may be able to offer special activities for older children in lieu of regular play sessions

- building relationships with the school attended by school age children to ensure successful transitions between the school and the service. While this is most relevant to outside school hours care services, family day care and long day care services who take children for before or after school care also need to ensure that children are moved safely between the school and their service.

### What are the particular issues experienced by outside school hours care services?

Outside school hours care services often experience unique challenges at the start of the year, especially in ensuring the safe transition of children between their service and the school setting. Services need to set out a clear process for the school to identify the children who are attending outside school hours care on each day, and the arrangements that will be made to ensure that these children are ready to move to the service at the end of the day.

While some older children may be able to take responsibility for being at the correct location for transition to the outside school hours care service, this is not a realistic expectation for all children, especially for those who are attending both school and outside school hours care for the first time. Services may consider assigning responsibility to key individuals for liaising with the children's class room teachers and for collecting/dropping off children directly to their classroom for the first couple of weeks.

Families can also be encouraged to be proactive in informing their child's teacher about requirements for their child's attendance at after school care. Holding an open day where children,

families and staff can meet can also assist with preparing for effective transitions between school and care.

Child care professionals in before school care services may find that children who are new to school become upset or experience separation anxiety when they are taken to school at the end of the care session. This can be emotionally demanding for the professionals involved and may be difficult to manage when there are a number of children who need to be transported from before school care to school. In this situation, professionals may need to work closely with the school and family to develop effective strategies to assist the child to settle.

It is important to note that staff working in outside school hours care settings that offer vacation care often find that they are managing the challenges of settling new children, families and staff immediately following the busy vacation care period. It is therefore important that these services plan well in advance to prepare for the new year, and they may need to start contacting schools to plan for children's transition arrangements in the final months of the preceding year.

### Conclusion

While sometimes challenging, the beginning of the year can offer child care professionals opportunities to make changes that will benefit themselves, families and, most importantly, children. The tumult that is often associated with the changes that take place at the start of the year can have the positive outcome of paving the way for the introduction and refinement of new ideas, practices and relationships ■

### References and further reading:

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